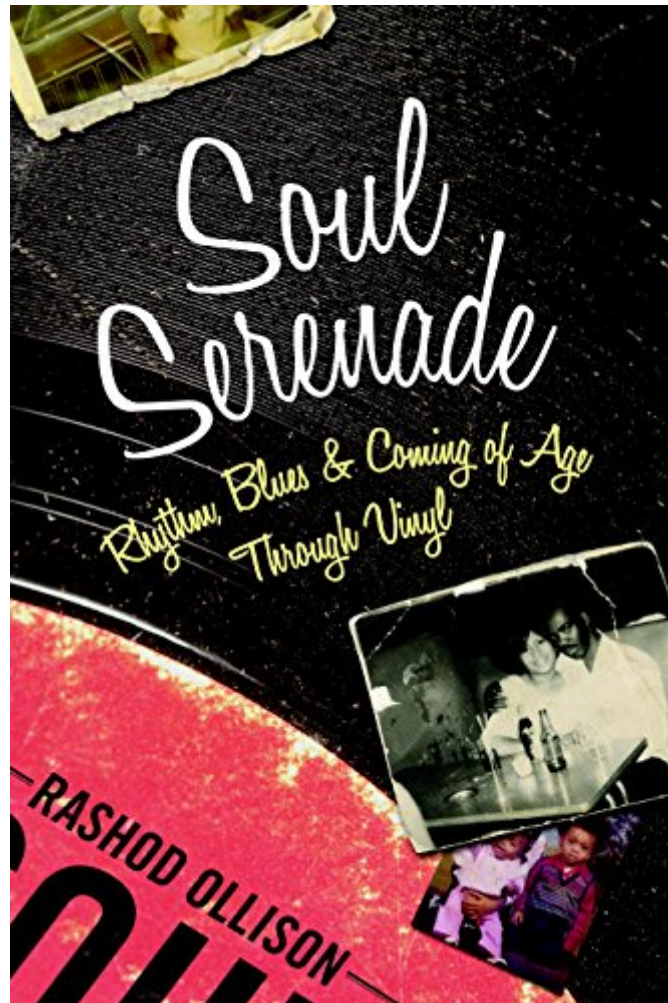


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Soul Serenade: Rhythm, Blues & Coming Of Age Through Vinyl



Synopsis

A coming-of-age memoir about a young boy in rural Arkansas who searches for himself and his distant father through soul music. Growing up in rural Arkansas, young Rashod Ollison turned to music to make sense of his life. The dysfunction, sadness, and steely resilience of his family and neighbors was reflected in the R&B songs that played on 45s in smoky rooms. Steeped in the sounds, the smells, the salty language of rural Arkansas in the 1980s, *Soul Serenade* is the memoir of a pop music critic whose love for soul music was fostered by his father, Raymond. Drafted into the Vietnam War as a teenager, Raymond returned a changed man, "dead on the inside." After his parents' volatile marriage ended in divorce, Rashod was haunted by the memory of his itinerant father and his mother's long forgotten "sunshine smile." For six-year-old Rashod, his father's record collection—the music of Aretha Franklin, Bobby Womack, Al Green, and others—provided solace, coherence, and escape. Moving nine times during his childhood, Rashod constantly adjusted to new schools and homes with his two sisters, Dusa and Reagan, and his mother, Dianne. Resilient and tough, while also being distant and punitive, she worked multiple jobs, striving to make ends meet at each other if they couldn't meet. He spent time with his acerbic mother's mother, Mama Teacake, and her family's living-out-loud ways, which clashed with his father's family—religious, discreet, and appropriate—where Rashod gravitated to Big Mama and Paw Paw, his father's parents. Becoming aware of his same-sex attraction, Rashod felt further isolated and alone but was encouraged by mentors in the community who fostered his intelligence and talent. He became transformed through discovering the writing of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Nikki Giovanni, and other literary greats, and these books, along with the soulful sounds of the 1970s and 80s, enabled him to thrive in spite of the instability and harshness of his childhood. In textured and evocative language, and peppered with unexpected humor, *Soul Serenade* is an original and captivating coming-of-age story set to an original beat.

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Customer Reviews

"Soul Serenade: Rhythm, Blues & Coming of Age Through Vinyl" (2016 publication; 238 pages) is a memoir from debut author Rashod Ollison, reflecting on his youth and upbringing in Arkansas. As the book opens, the author introduces us to his family, and his parents in particular (to whom the memoir is dedicated, incidentally). "Daddy didn't think he'd live to see manhood, especially after he was drafted into the Vietnam War just before his nineteenth birthday. After a dishonorable discharge, Daddy returned to Arkansas a changed man, a time bomb, dead on the inside." But it is the author's dad who installs a love for music in him, allowing the young boy to explore sounds, old and new, all of course on vinyl (this is before the era of CDs of course): Millie Jackson, Aretha Franklin, Chaka Khan, Stevie Wonder, etc. But it's Michael Jackson's "Thriller" that really shakes up the young man, and help him forget his sorrows. Ah yes, the living wasn't easy: with Daddy out of the picture, Mother and her 3 kids moved around frequently. Couple of comments: the memoir essentially covers the author's years up and through high school. Given the circumstances of his upbringing (loving but distant mother, frequent bullying at school, etc.), one can't help but stand in amazement how well the author was able to get through these years. Also, while there is a fair amount of discussion by the author on how music influenced him, in particular the early part of the book, that all but disappears as we get deeper in the book. It is not a criticism of the book as such, as the book makes for a compelling reading that reminds us that one may be poor (in money) but rich (in many different aspects).

I expected Mr. Ollison to have the same voice in his memoir that he has in his music columns, which is a silly expectation to begin with. Instead, his profession is more of a soundtrack to his story. There is minimal discussion of music per se, rather a roster of the names he associates with the times he

lived through and their connections to his experiences. Serenade is a song of development in his world full of macro and micro forces buffeting him along. Most of the time the musical personalities he mentions just caused their music to play in my head as I rode along his path. Sometimes he mentioned someone I did not know, or occasionally a particular song, and I took the time to pause and play it, if only a sample when I could not locate the full recording. Many might find that too disruptive, but for me it amplified my appreciation of his story, as it were. Part One is a busy genealogy of sorts. Not so important to get it all charted properly, but to feel the broad cast of characters across the three generations that touch him. The range of personalities and experiences broadens his world, good and bad, as his world extends and his understanding adapts him to a bigger stage. He captures the complexity of the people in his life, as perhaps one can do only in retrospection. His father, casting a long and tragic shadow is seen both as the veteran of war, deadened inside, and yet as the big clown with his boy. A cut of music can be as Proustian as a piece of tea cake. Part Two is his father's dalliance and departure, and a lonely if crowded wandering through his childhood. His mother is left to muddle through, and her own hard attempts to fill that hole in her own life. More sorts of music and life goes on. The action reads more like a novel than a memoir.

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